

Fatherneed: Why Fathers Are So Crucial to Their Children's Health

Fatherhood Forum

Connecticut Department of Social Services,
Connecticut Commission on Children

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Work/Family Stress and Strain affects mothers, fathers and kids

- *Way* you parent matters more than *whether* you work
- ‘Quality time’ as myth; children are/feel raised in *ordinary* time by *both* parents
- Kids want their parents to be *less stressed/tired*, regardless of socioeconomic grouping
- Poor quality child care/education preoccupies mothers *and* fathers, reducing productivity



*It is the primary task of every society to teach
men how to father.*

-Margaret Meade

Mothering/Fathering well at any age

- *Sensitivity* to needs
- Make children feel adored/valued
- Sustain strong values
- Discipline to teach
- Affirm uniqueness/expect competence
- Promote education as process
- Be an abiding presence – whatever comes
- Safeguard rituals and routines

Evidence that Men Respond to Children

- Biological response to colicky infant
- Touch and smell recognition
- Spontaneous speech patterns
- Hormones and Fatherhood:
 - testosterone: drops 33% for 1 mo. at birth
 - estrogen: increases 1 mo. prior/ 3 mos. post birth
 - prolactin: increases 20% for 3 wks. post birth

Evidence that Children Respond Directly to Men

- 6 wk olds respond differently to mother/father
- Toddlers use clearer behavioral cues to father
- Preschoolers use more advanced speech with fathers

Father-Child Interactions

Unique maternal vs. paternal comfort-seeking behavior depending on *age*

Role of “significant other”

Salience of play in paternal intimacy (USA)

Skill-building in the ‘wonder years’

Teenagers and ‘limit setting’

Strongly promoted by partner support (culture?)

Distinguishing Maternal/Paternal Behaviors

- Preference for activation/stimulation vs. soothing
- Unpredictable vs. predictable/regulating style
- Preparation for place in the world vs. relationships
- Discipline: 'real world' vs. relational
- Frustration tolerance vs. facilitating
- Respect vs. gatekeeping

Child Outcomes of Involved 'Fathering' [*N.B.*, CT!]

Behavioral

- Reduced contact with juvenile justice
- Delay in initial sexual activity, reduced teen pregnancy
- Reduced rate of divorce
- Less reliance on aggressive conflict resolution

Educational

- Higher grade completion and income
- Math competence in girls
- Verbal strength in boys and girls (literacy)

Emotional

- Greater problem-solving competence, and stress tolerance
- Greater empathy, moral sensitivity and reduced gender stereotyping

Variations on the theme?

- All of the above relatively independent of the type of fathering, and instead...
- Dependent on the sensitivity/quality of the fathering
- Biological, step, adoptive, unmarried, never married, etc. - matters less than the nature of the relationship, its value to both child and man, and the culture that shapes that relationship - Hispanic, African-American, Anglo (valley vs.?), etc.

Adult Male Outcomes of Involved Fathering

Increased:

- Longevity
- Length of marriage
- Level of health
- Responsibility for relationships

Decreased:

- Accidental death
- Suicide
- Job Change
- Aggression/impulsivity

... and a new brain?

- Neurobiological changes seen at 2 weeks that are different than moms
- Highly involved fathers showed enhanced activity in regions of brain associated with:
 - 1) bond formation
 - 2) auditory processing
 - 3) discrimination between crying/laughing)

Diane Feygin YSM

Risks to Fatherhood

- Unemployment/Guilt
- Inexperience
- Isolation
- Exclusion from child's life
 - [divorce, gatekeeping, child care/health/educational settings]
- Work-family stress transcends gender, especially for men

Strategic Applications That Exploit Benefits of Paternal Presence in Practice

- Use Department of Public Health, Department of Education, etc. moments to encourage father involvement:
 - Pregnancy, childbirth, illness, entrance into child care, school, marital separation, adolescence, job loss
- Encourage fathers to establish paternity
- Support of ongoing employment (providing is fathering for many)
- Ongoing training of state employees (all levels!)
 - Maintain expectation of support for involvement, especially among female staff and administrators
- Support maternal encouragement of father involvement with children
 - Awareness of gatekeeping tendency, ongoing vigilance (FAC)

Measurable outcome? Early Head Start and Fatherhood

- Less intrusive/more responsive, less spanking/more language
- More responsive interaction father/child
- Promote cognitive strengths in toddlers

*Fathers are the single greatest
untapped resource in the lives of
Connecticut's children*

*“Thanks for coming...”
- Connecticut's Kids*